

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

U.S. EDITION

**Questions of Security: Cultural Difference May Be Hampering Probe of Terrorism**

By Wall Street Journal staff reporters Mark Schoofs in New York, Gary Fields in Washington and Jesse Pesta in Hyderabad, India

983 words

30 October 2001

The Wall Street Journal

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A6

English

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The shaving practices of Muslims may have confused investigators who are holding two men they believe might have been planning to hijack a fifth plane on Sept. 11, in a sign of cultural differences hampering the investigation into those attacks.

The two men, Mohamad Jaweed Azmath and Ayub Ali Khan, remain two of the most enigmatic witnesses detained in the dragnet that has incarcerated more than 900 people so far. Mr. Khan and Mr. Azmath flew on Sept. 11 from Newark, N.J., to St. Louis, where their plane was grounded because of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. They were arrested the next day on a train in Fort Worth, Texas, with box-cutter knives, hair dye and multiple passport photographs. But an internal FBI report noted the men had also shaved their bodies, according to a law-enforcement official who has seen the report. This stoked the FBI's suspicion that they might be intended hijackers.

It isn't clear what part of their bodies were shaved. A letter found in the luggage of Mohamed Atta, thought to be a ringleader of the hijackers, calls for shaving "excess hair" from the body.

But numerous authorities on Muslim culture -- including people in Mr. Khan's and Mr. Azmath's native town of Hyderabad, India -- say shaving armpit and pubic hair is a common Muslim practice in some countries. "It's a 'sunna,' " meaning traditional practice, says Richard Bulliet, a history professor and authority on Islam at Columbia University in New York. "There is a general feeling in certain areas that all body hair is unclean. You'd find it more in Pakistan and eastwards than in, say, Egypt." Shaving in this sense, say other authorities, should be done every 40 days or so.

But the practice also can have more ritual meaning. In some regions, such as Egypt, shaving the armpits and pubic regions is done before marriage or the pilgrimage to Mecca called the Hajj.

In the letter found in Mr. Atta's luggage, the same sentence that tells the hijackers to shave also tells them to apply ointments, using the word "tatayyub." That word "is in a highly religious register of the language," notes Ayman El-Desouky, a lecturer of Arabic at Harvard University. But while Mr. Desouky thinks the letter suggests a ritual undertaken before meeting one's creator, he says "it's possible" it refers to the more commonplace hygienic practice.

One investigator says authorities aren't sure about the significance of some issues, such as the nervousness of the two men when first confronted by police, and their statement -- without being asked directly -- that they weren't involved in what happened in New York City. During questioning, the men were reluctant to look at investigators. "For us, that is one of the factors we look at" whether a person looks at the interrogator or has sudden eye movements that might indicate nervousness, says the investigator. But "we can't say in this case whether it is simply considered disrespectful to look directly at someone in their culture. We don't know."

In India, regardless of religion, it is considered "disrespectful and disobedient" for a person to look into the eyes of someone in higher authority, said Kaleem Kawaja, executive director of the Association of Indian Muslims, which has headquarters in Washington, D.C. "You keep your eyes low as a sign of respect. In this country, it's a sign someone is lying."

Sandra Carroll, FBI spokeswoman in New Jersey, said authorities still don't have any links between participants and possible associates in the Sept. 11 attacks and the current anthrax investigations. Mr. Khan and Mr. Azmath, like many of the detainees, are being held as material witnesses and haven't been charged

with any crime. Authorities are continuing anthrax testing on items taken from the Jersey City, N.J., apartment where Mr. Khan and Mr. Azmath lived but so far, results from those tests haven't come back.

The two men lived with a third roommate, Mohammad Aslam Pervez, who worked at the same newsstand as the other two and is charged with lying to investigators about checks he wrote to his employer, among others.

According to Indian government officials, who are investigating Mr. Azmath and Mr. Khan for passport fraud, Mr. Khan used a fake identity to obtain his U.S. visa in the early 1990s. Mr. Azmath lied about his age, marital status and street address to get his passport, police say. The police also are curious how the two men were able to remit a total of about \$54,000 back to their families in just a few months in mid-1999.

Neither family has heard from the men, who were longtime friends and schoolmates in Hyderabad. The families say the men called on Sept. 10 and said they were moving to Texas to look for work.

Officials in India are quick to stress that they have no evidence of wrongdoing aside from the apparently falsified information on the two men's passports. Both men's families acknowledge that some information may be wrong on the passports, and even government officials here say it is a common practice that is hard to battle.

Family members say the men saved for years before sending money home and that it went toward homes both families were building. The police acknowledge that the fund transfers appear to be legal, and it is clear where the cash went. "Like parents all over Hyderabad, they used the [remittance] money to build a big house," says Perveram Ramulu, Hyderabad's police commissioner.

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Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English
Results Found	73
Timestamp	22 February 2019 10:11 PM